First Presbyterian Church
Fort Lauderdale, Florida

GOD'S CURIOUS CHOICES
OR WHAT I WANT TO BE WHEN I GROW UP

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Church Officers Presentation

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Scripture
Mark 7:1-8

"You leave the commandments of God, and hold fast human tradition."
-Mark 7:8 (Inclusive Language Lectionary)

Abraham Lincoln, Grover Cleveland, Woodrow Wilson, Dwight Eisenhower, William Jennings Bryan, Norman Thomas, John Foster Dulles; John Wanamaker, Andrew Mellon, George Westinghouse, Thomas Watson, Frederick Weyerhauser, Louis Severance, Cyrus and Nettie McCormick... McGuffey, whose readers define an era in education, Poet Marianne Moore, Karl Menninger, publishers Gilbert Hovey (National Geographic), Henry R. Luce (Time), DeWitt Wallace (Readers Digest); Justices William O. Douglas and Tom Clark; Generals Stonewall Jackson and George MacClellan; J. Howard Pew and John Glenn and Arnold Palmer and John Dancy and Mr. Rogers and Dean Rusk and Walter Mondale and Dan Quayle and Catherine Marshall and Orel Hershiser... all of them intentional Presbyterian lay people,

like salt of the earth, leaven in the loaf and on occasion, light in the darkness.

Two hundred and one years ago, 1789, thirty-four Presbyterians met in Philadelphia and decided that they were a national organization... the Presbyterian Church. They represented 420 congregations scattered throughout the new nation and its frontier. Together they were the largest, best educated, most orderly church in the new world. They had a strong sense that they were a part of the new era in world history which was coming to pass with the birth of the American Republic, and so they dated the documents from that meeting, not May 1789, but "In the thirteenth year of the Independence of the United States of America." They had been there from the beginning. Two Presbyterian churches, established in 1640, were already nearly 150 years old in 1789.

Today, there are 11,600 congregations which comprise the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in a world which is radically different and from a posture in the world which has changed radically and is still changing. We are, almost everyone agrees, no longer at the center of things... Last May Time Magazine featured a major article, "Those Mainline Blues" which explored the phenomenon now familiar to all observers of our culture.

The old established churches are declining in real numbers and perhaps influence. Even if you don't agree with the doom-sayers who predict that at the current rate of decline the last Presbyterian will expire sometime in the second decade of the next century... everyone agrees that things are different today from the day a few decades ago when the Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church was on the cover of Time and President Eisenhower took time off to help the Presbyterians dedicate a new office building in New York City.

I submit, in a way I hope is not overly parochial, that the role of mainline churches in general and the Presbyterian Church in particular, is critical, worth being concerned about.

I come to that conclusion not, I hope, on the basis of pride or nostalgia alone, although I have plenty of both for the church that baptized me, appropriated the Gospel to me, nurtured me, aggravated and agitated me on occasion... the church which attended to the baptism of my own children, the funerals of my parents and in which my younger brother and oldest daughter are now Ruling Elders... So it runs deeply and I care deeply. But my conclusion that the Presbyerian Ethos is worth working to preserve is based on the

values which Presbyterians have conceived, loved, nurtured, fought for and sometimes suffered for.

You can see them early in our story.

The group that met in Phildelphia in 1789 understood that it was time to think anew. The presiding officer was John Witherspoon, President of the College of New Jersey at Princeton. To show his support of the order which was emerging, Witherspoon and several of the others had stopped wearing their wigs in 1776. Thirteen years earlier he had signed his name to the Declaration of Independence, just two blocks down the street, the only clergyman to do so.

Witherspoon preached the sermon, then presided as the Assembly elected one of its own as Moderator, John Rodgers. Historians sometimes like to note the similarities between Presbyterian Church structure and the Federal Government. In fact two years earlier, in the same city, meetings were held just two blocks apart in which the concepts were hammered out which resulted in the Constitution and Bill of Rights, and the structure of the National Presbyterian Church. The central issue for both groups was the matter of authority: who gets it, how it is to be exercised and how limited or controlled. Both chose a strong central authority, but limited by checks and balances and

local autonomy: neither a monarchy, king nor bishops, which they had enough of, nor a pure democracy - but something in between, a Republic.

And then the Presbyterians went to work. They appointed a few missionaries to organize churches on the frontier: they commissioned several representatives to open discussions with other Christian churches, they had a fierce argument about a hymnal, they discussed the schools and colleges they had founded and they composed a letter to the President of the United States, George Washington. Calvinists that they were, they presumed not only to speak to their congregations, they spoke for the church to the world, always very risky business. "We ought not to forget our consequence in the Republic," they said. It is one of our traditions.

Presbyterian values have been like seasoning in the larger context of American culture. We have never been as prominent numerically as we were in 1789, but we have always been a critical minority, a lively source of flavor for the rest of the culture:

1) The Heart/Mind Connection. We have from the beginning emphasized education - understanding - in the earliest days the ability to read Scripture and understand: today, the necessity of

comprehending what we believe and how we believe it in our complex world.

2) The Deliberative Process as a fairly dependable way to arrive at the truth, consensus and therefore the ability to live together - critical today when it is fashionable to shout one's truth to the other side through a bull horn.

3) The Faith/Life Connection. Calvin said you can't isolate religion from life - so, we've been sticking our ecclesiastical nose into the world's business for centuries. It may not always make you happy - but I don't want to live in a society where religion is domesticated, tame, compliant.

4) Our Theology of Vocation - perhaps our most precious possession - you - laity - officers, elected by the congregation - you are church, not we - clergy, ————————.

Vocations
T J Lowdrick

meets with mother superior

bad food

hard bed

I quit

"doesn't surprise me a bit. You've been around her for 30 years and all you've done is complain..."

#3

I'm honored to be asked to spend time with you - elders - leaders of this congregation. You are our genius. You are one of our unique contributions to the church universal. We are not noted for our elaborate liturgies - like Episcopalians, or our muscular missionary activity, like Mormons or our heroic life styles like the Seventh Day Adventists or the more honest Methodists who hew to the party line about this world's pleasures...

Our major contribution has been you - the laity - lay people ordained to office, with authority and responsibility for the church - Almost ~~unusually~~ universally - authority in the church is lodged in clergy -

In hierarchial system - intentionally - but just as efficiently in the free church tradition, when without structure or theological rationale the preacher still runs the show -

But not here - [redacted] can't do much without you - Dick

Can't have a meeting - pass a budget - probably better not spend money or receive members

without you...

You are our genius -

So it seems appropriate to think a bit on this occasion about who you are and how who you are expresses your faith both in the church but also not in the church - where, after all, you spend the vast majority of your time.

The topic is VOCATION - the title is ~~What~~ Will I Do When I Grow Up?

Vocation - Webster says - means "summons." It's from the later Latin vocatus - vocare is the very - to call. Vocal - - voice - vocation - to have a vocation is to be summoned - to hear a voice - to have a call. So far so good.

Then Webster reflects the biggest theological error in the history of Christiandom - "an entry - into the priesthood or religious order"

Finally - Webster returns to the point - "a vocation is the work in which a person is regularly employed."

~~Now is that a descending error of theological significance~~ Now that is a very important theological assumption - - religious professionals hear voices calling - them to their "vocations" - while all the rest simply do whatever puts bread and butter on the table?

Our tradition has a radical, important and redeeming word to say on the topic...

God's Curious Choice or What Will I Do - etc

But first - deciding what to do when you grow up is not as simple as it used to be...

Time was when you had to know what you wanted to do - in high school. When I went to college - people in the Blue Collar town asked "Why? What do you want to do?" i.e. the reason to go to college was to acquire marketable skills in a vocation you had already chosen - at the wise old age of 17.

And then you graduated at 21 and if Uncle Sam didn't need your services - you either started doing what your have prepared to do - teach school, for instance, or you entered Grad School for a few more years and began doing "It" at 24 or 25.

Think of the revolution in our culture in vocation? It is now standard for kids to graduate - come home - hang out - and decide what to do next. And then for 3 or 4 years to agonize. Many professional schools don't really want them until they have hung out for 3 years. My youngsters have all done it. On the telephone, they tell their friends "they're hanging out." So the push out of the nest has to happen again but w/ finesse + gentleness - for as big this is deeply big now!

And the reason behind it all is that today - the average American worker will change jobs abour 4 or 5 times... Many of them ~~bring~~ big changes.

TODAY show ~~this AM~~ recently - a BROKER - $400,000 a year - bought sheep farm in up-state New York, sells sheep MILK yogurt, loves it.

What's [illegible] Vocation - & Ministry Career

Presbyterian minister and author, Fred Buechner, adding seminary graduates once admitted that at 50 he is still not sure he has resolved the matter of what to be when he grows up. "People read my books, want my to autograph them, listen to me speak, ask my opinions... If they only knew how unsure I am..."

What does our faith tradition acutally say about the matter... First of all it says, that God is interested - in fact is involved in vocation - does call people to do things, go places, become people they don't necessarily want to become.

On of the best stories of all is about Moses.

You may recall the preface: Moses is saved, as an infant, from the paranoid genocide of the Pharaoh by being placed in a basket in the bullrushes, is rescued by Pharaoh's daughter, grows up in the royal court, kills an Egyptian, is a refugee, marries and settles down, has a son, goes into business with his father-in-law. And then one day he sees a burning bush in the desert and hears a voice that says "I have heard the cry of my people in Egypt... Come I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people." To which Moses says, with considerable understatement, but with absolute clarity, "Who, me?"

"Who am I that I should go?" and there begins the kind of dialogue between Moses and God that you and I can understand...

"Who me?" asks Moses. "I'm not qualified for that." "I'll go with you," God says...

"What if I go; what will I say to them? I'm not a theologian... I'm not even very religious." And God says "Tell them 'I Am' sent you."

And Moses says, "If I say that, they won't believe me." And God says "I'll help you."

And Moses says "But I'm not eloquent.." as a matter of fact I'm a lousy public speaker." And God: "I will teach you what to say."

Finally, having exhausted all the reasons he can think of for not going Moses puts it as clearly as anyone could, without adornment or rationale: "Oh my Lord, send, I pray, some other person."

Now I don't know about you, but preceding most of the interesting things I've ever done, I engaged in something like that dialogue. If it was not with God, at least with the person on the other end of the telephone asking me to do a job I didn't think I could do, and therefore didn't think I wanted to do.

"Why me? I don't know how to do it - I'm not qualified. I don't have any experience. And - how about Joe, or Sally - Oh, my Lord - send some

other person."

You see, we have not ever been able to shake the notion that God has something to do with who we are and where we are and what we are to do with our lives. We have not been able to think about the matter of our vocation without some sense that something, someone is part of the dynamic - pushing, prodding, stirring us up, showing us tantalizing possibilities, opening a door here, slamming a door there. We have not been able to avoid the mysterious possibility that God has something in mind for us and that God's coming to us in Jesus Christ is in some way a summons to our vocation - a calling to become what God means for us to become.

John Updike keeps writing about things like that with considerable beauty, I think. In his latest book, Self Consciousness, which is a kind of personal memoir, he writes about spending an evening walking the streets of the small Pennsylvania town where he grew up... about the school and five and dime store, the fabulously fat policeman, the luncheonette, the people and the houses... the town where he was secure "in the belief that I was known, watched, placed."

As he walks the dark streets Updike invokes the German word which lies at the heart of

DA-ZINE

philosophy - "Dasein... the first mystery that confronts us is "why me?" The next is "why here?" Haven't you asked that? "Why me? Why here?" [p.6] And then at the end he provides a kind of answer which I found both provocative and moving.

"Dasein (why me - why here?)... Isn't it a miracle, the oddity of consciousness being placed in one body rather than another, in one place and not somewhere else, in one handful of decades rather than in ancient Egypt, or ninth-century Wessex, or Samoa before the missionaries came, or Bulgaria under the Turkish Yoke, or the Ob River Valley in the days of the wooly mammoths? Billions of consciousnesses silt history full and every one of them the center of the universe. What can we do in the face of this unthinkable truth but scream or take refuge in God?" [p. 40]

So we take refuge... from the beginning our stories tell us that God has a part in who we are, where we are and what we become. God makes choices. God meant for it to be Moses... chose him for a set of reasons. Peter and Andrew, James and John are not simply the first four men Jesus meets on the day he decides to recruit disciples... They are intended by God, gifted by God in ways they don't even understand, particularly skilled to do work they don't begin to comprehend.

Expand this call of disciples

God, that is to say, MAKES CHOICES AND THEY ARE SOMETIMES VERY CURIOUS.

Shortly after the Christian Church got going, it adopted a very peculiar idea; namely that there were two kinds of Christians - clergy and lay people. It adopted that notion because the world in which it lived loved to set up dichotomies like that, dualities: light and darkness, body and spirit, sacred and secular. It got that notion, not from Jesus, but from the Greek philosophers. In any event, it wasn't long before the young church had a full-fledged caste system: clergy and laity. Clergy live in the world of the spirit, the church. Laity live in the other, real world.

Clergy dress different. Act different. Lived - fundamentally different - particularly when it came to sex.

It may have been the worst mistake we ever made. Because it wasn't very long until we compounded it with an even worse error. Namely, the notion that God chooses the clergy to be clergy, but leaves every other person up to his/her own wits to decide what to do. Vocation became calling to priesthood. It took more than a thousand years to undo the damage and we are still trying to deal with it.

"We are all priests" said John Calvin and Martin Luther. And by that they did not mean that you don't need a priest to intercede with God - the traditional, belligerent Protestant battle cry. What they meant is something far more important; namely, that every man and woman is called by God

to ministry... not just the professional clergy, but ministry in the broader sense of doing God's work. Every life has meaning, and significant and important work to do. There is no such thing as a sacred as opposed to a secular vocation.

The radical Protestant principal is that God's work is done when faithful people do the world's work with mercy and justice and dedication and love. Building walls, washing clothes, arguing cases, performing surgery, selling stocks, taking blood, having babies, playing a violin, teaching children, fighting fires, negotiating contracts, flying airplanes... and preaching sermons.

Madeleine L'Engle wrote: "We are all asked to do more than we can do. Every hero and heroine of the Bible does more than he would have thought possible to do from Gideon to Esther to Mary." [Walking on Water, p. 6] None of them were qualified... it would appear.

Curious choices. Morton Kelsey has written about why Jesus chose fishermen instead of lawyers or architects. He suggests that it wasn't a bad decision at all when you consider the patience, dedication, and stubbornness which you have to have to fish with any success. And their age - young people, all of them, probably late twenties. Kelsey writes: "speaking as one in his late

sixties, I know that I have learned much in the last 25 years but I have also realized that there is a dedication, energy and power in young men and women... Would Christianity have spread, had most of Jesus' disciples been in their sixties?" [Resurrection, p. 122]

Think of how many of the wonderfully gifted seem at first totally unequipped to do what they do brilliantly... Jim Abbott pitching magnificently with no right hand... Beethoven writing the passionate Ninth Symphony as deafness closes in... Van Gogh painting sunflowers while descending into the dark night of the soul.

I don't know about you but I'm not Beethoven or VanGogh - or Abbott - ~~although I did pitch a little and I couldn't do much that~~ but pitch at Cubs ball park last week.

How do you and I know what to do, where to go... what God wants us to become? For some people it comes dramatically... a man walks by and says "follow me." Sometimes it is a voice in the dark, a burning bush, a close brush with death. For some, says Fred Buechner, it begins with a lump in the throat or a tear in the eye.

And, for others it is a matter of simply and honestly surveying the gifts you have been given and asking a most simple question: "To what

purpose should I be putting the gifts God has given me?"

And for others it is a matter of responding to the insistent voices - sometimes, frequently in fact, contained in the cries of pain and anguish that haunt us in the night: the cries of the hungry, and homeless, and sick and oppressed. God calls us, I do believe, through our own uneasy conscience, our own passion for justice -- our own anger even, our impatience with structures of injustice in the world.

And God calls us through our love. God, I believe, uses our loves, our passions, our hopes, our dreams... God puts them in our hearts.

God's work is done, not just when people decide to become clergy, but when the world's work is done with mercy and love and dedication and justice.

What we actually believe is that God has chosen you, elected you, in Jesus Christ called you. You are a chosen one. We say that in a universal sense, in a way that exceeds our ability to comprehend. But also in a very personal sense. God calls you to ministry.

It is a matter of very great importance to each one of us to listen, to know and to respond. For, in the final analysis it is our own identity

that is at stake. God can probably find someone else to do our work. In fact, finding substitutes to do the work people refuse to do is probably one of God's major activities. What is really at stake is us: the meaning and purpose of our lives, our joy, our love, our fulfillment, our peace at the end of the day...

In his journal for May 6, 1854, Thoreau wrote

"All that a man (or woman) has to say or do that can possibly concern mankind, is in some shape or other to tell the story of his love,... to sing, and if he is fortunate and keeps alive, he will be forever in love. This alone is to be alive..."

When I was struggling with my own sense of vocation, trying to decide whether or not to go through with this ministry business, someone gave me a copy of Markings, Dag Hammarskjold's personal journal. He was the Secretary General of the United Nations from 1953 until his death in 1961, in an airplane crash while on a peace-making mission in Africa.

The book reveals a deeply thoughtful man who in the midst of his distinguished career as a civil servant was still struggling with his sense of vocation.

What he wrote was important to me because it helped me to see that there is a question to be answered before we decide what to do - that whether or not we are ministers, doctors, lawyers, construction workers, is really not as important as the question of who we are. And so for thirty years this famous Hammarskjold vignette has been important to me:

"I don't know who or what put the question, I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer Yes to Someone or Something and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaninful and that, therefore, my life in self-surrender, had a goal." (Markings, p. 205)

(Insert) That's what is at stake. It is both the invitation and the promise of discipleship... At the beginning of the story Jesus chooses people and calls them to follow. And at the end, at the table of the Last Supper, he says it again: "You did not choose me. I chose you."

You may not always see it clearly, as they did not. The voice may not be terribly loud and distinct. And you may find yourself arguing with it a lot - in ways you'd be too embarrassed to discuss with anyone. But God means for there to be a you...

God has something in mind.

God has tasks which you are uniquely equipped to do... And therefore there is a reason for your being.

God has chosen you... a curious choice perhaps, but we do believe that. In Jesus Christ God has called you.

The adventure starts when you lay down nets and follow; when you say "here I am, send me..." when in some way or another you say yes to the voice of God calling your name.

Again - thank you for your service to the church - You - expressing at least part of your calling, your vocation - through the church - ~~all~~ as our Presbyterian genius.